Sergei Alexeyev

MY FIRST BOOK

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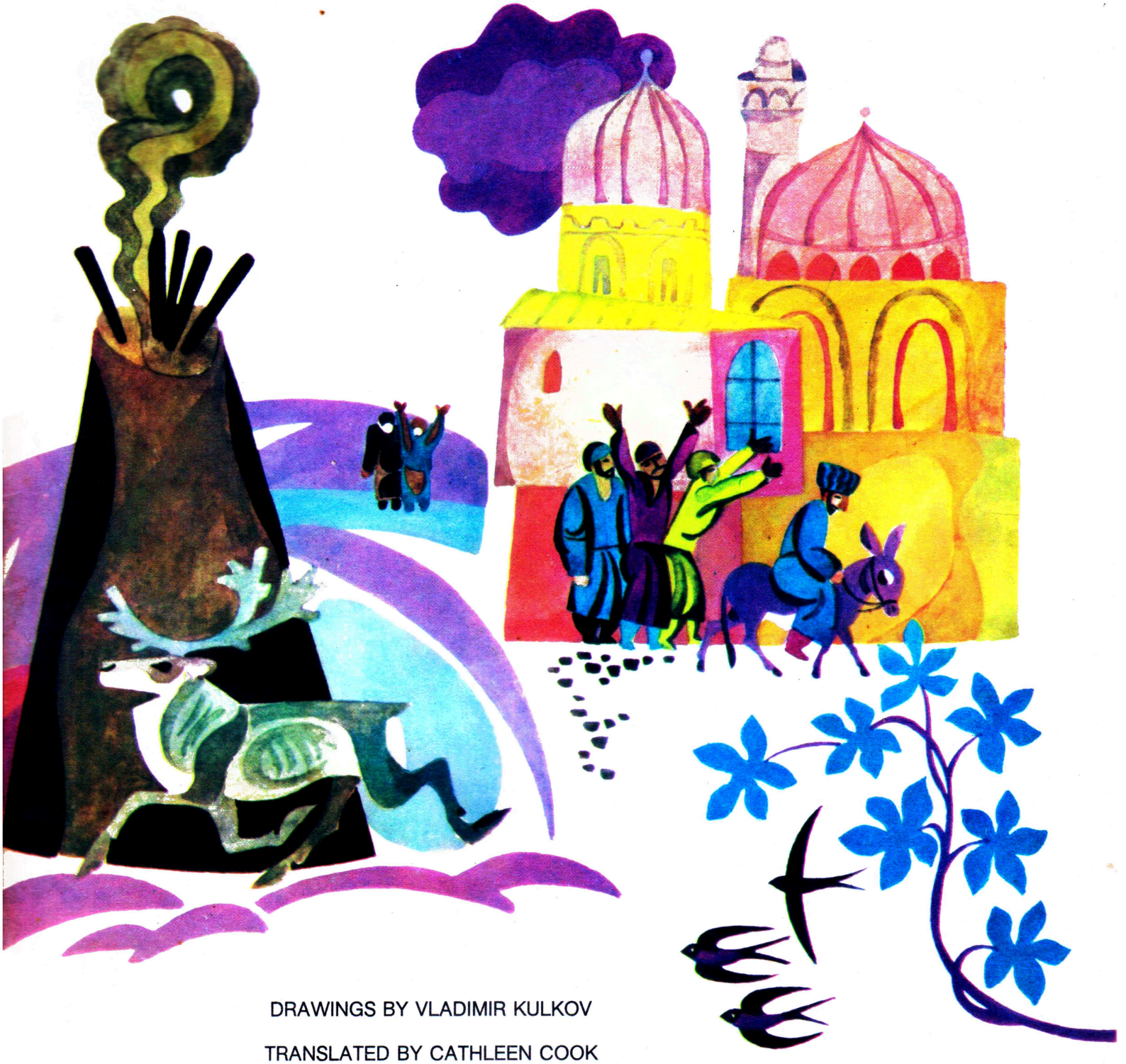

DRAWINGS BY VLADIMIR KULKOV

TRANSLATED BY CATHLEEN COOK

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THE RED EAGLE

asul's grandfather lived in a village high in the Caucasus Mountains. Up there only the eagles flew. And the fierce winds blew. The mountains stretched almost to the sun. On tiptoe you can touch the sun with your hand.

Rasul's hut was far away from there. Down in the fertile valley. Horsemen came galloping into the valley with the news of Soviet power. Rasul listened to their stories about land, peace and Comrade Lenin. The young commander described the new life very vividly.

Rasul followed the Caucasian horseman round all day, asking him the same questions over and over again.

"So there won't be a tsar any more?"

"No," replied the horseman.

"And the land in the valley will be given to the people?"

"Yes," replied the horseman.

"And the rich princes will be chased away?"

"They'll run away of their own accord."

Rasul made friends with the horseman. He showed him the dagger he had made and told him about his grandfather.

In the morning the heralds took their leave of the peasants and galloped on.

Rasul had learnt a lot. But what about his grandfather? He was high up in the mountains. Who would tell him about everything? Rasul would have. But Rasul was still very small. He could not go up the mountains.

Then suddenly Rasul remembered: his grandfather was a tracker, a hunter. He had been friends with the birds ever since he was a child and could understand what the eagles said. An eagle! That's who could tell the old man everything, that's who could fly into the mountains in a flash.

Rasul went down to the river. There, on a cliff, sat one of the proud celestial dwellers. The boy ran up to the cliff.

"Hey!" he shouted to the mighty bird.

The eagle looked at Rasul.

Rasul told the eagle about land, peace and Comrade Lenin. "Fly up into the mountains, quickly," he begged him. "To my granddad. His name's Abdulkerim. And tell him the important news."

The eagle shifted from side to side, threw back his head, and spread his powerful wings.

"Don't get it wrong!" shouted Rasul. "Tell him it word for word."

The eagle soared into the sky.

Three days later old Abdulkerim came down into the valley.

Rasul looked at his grandfather: he was wearing a new felt cloak and Circassian coat and smiling at his grandson. The eagle did as I told him, thought Rasul. The boy rushed up to his grandfather.

"It was I who sent the eagle!"

"You?"

"Yes," Rasul went on. "Did he tell you about land?"

"He did."

"And about peace?"

"Yes."

"And about Comrade Lenin?"

"Yes."

"That's all me," Rasul cried triumphantly. "He's a good eagle, isn't he?"

"He is," the grandfather replied. "A good one. And his horse is good too."

Rasul was pleased with the answer. But then he thought: "What's that about a horse? Oh, old Abdulkerim must have got it mixed up."

"A real eagle," the old man repeated, even sticking out his chest and winking boyishly at his grandson. "A red eagle!"

Now Rasul really was confused.

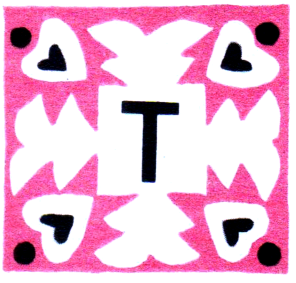
"A red eagle? Are there red eagles?"

"Yes, there are," his grandfather replied.

Rasul was most upset at not having noticed that down by the river. Perhaps the sun had been shining in a funny way.

It was spring in the Caucasus Mountains. The horsemen spread the great tidings.

CHICHIKO AND NINA THE RUSSIAN GIRL



hey are friends—the Georgian boy Chichiko and the Russian girl Nina.

They run along the beach by the sea:

"Chichiko! Chichiko! Chichiko!" Nina hurries to catch up her friend. The sound of her voice rings over the sea for a long time.

The children go up into the mountains:

"Nino! Nino! Nino!" Chichiko calls to Nina.

The children climb down into a dark ravine.

"Nino! Chichiko! Nino! Chichiko! Nino! Chichiko!" The ravine rings with a hundred echoes.

The boy and girl have been friends for a year now. If you see Chichiko walking along, Nina is bound to be by his side. And if you catch sight of Nina, just blink your eyes and you will see Chichiko. They are friends, Chichiko and Nina the Russian girl.

What about before? You'd never believe it. Before it was quite different. Nina was afraid of Chichiko. And Chichiko steered clear of Nina. The children lived in the same village, but they might have been living in two different countries.

And not only the children.

A small mountain stream divided the village into two halves. Georgians lived in one half, and Russians had settled in the other. A minor Russian nobleman was in charge of the Russian half. And in the other half a certain Georgian prince

gave the orders. But the head of the whole village was the ugly-faced, big-nosed, fat-bellied tsar's constable.

There are many different nationalities in the Caucasus: Ossetians, Abkhazians, Adzharians, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanians, Ingushes, Cabardinians and Russians. And more besides. Rich men do not want the ordinary people to live in friendship. It is easier to order people around when they live in enmity with one another. Easier to oppress them. To fleece the poor.

So let the peoples live in enmity. Let them hate one another.

The rich intimidate the poor, strike fear into their hearts.

And so it was in this little mountain village. They made the Georgians afraid of the Russians and the Russians afraid of the Georgians. As for themselves, they were thick as thieves. The Russian nobleman visited the Georgian prince. The Georgian prince visited the Russian nobleman. And the ugly-faced, big-nosed, fat-bellied tsar's constable was an honoured guest in both homes.

But then the peoples of Russia united and cast off the power of the rich, and Soviet power was established everywhere.

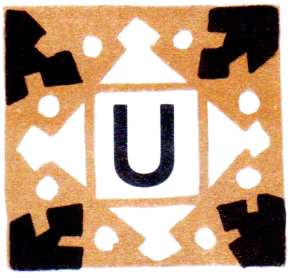
The mountain village changed too. The Russian nobleman cleared out, the Georgian prince was deposed for good, and the ugly-faced, big-nosed, fat-bellied tsar's constable vanished into thin air.

The people in the village have made friends. They are no longer separated by the mountain stream. There are no halves anymore, no two sides. Nina is not afraid of Chichiko now. And Chichiko is not afraid of Nina. Chichiko and the Russian girl Nina are inseparable now. If you see Chichiko walking along, Nina is bound to be by his side. And if you catch sight of Nina, just blink your eyes and you will see Chichiko.

"Nino! Chichiko! Nino! Chichiko! Nino! Chichiko!" the voices in the village ring.

They are friends—Chichiko and Nina the Russian girl.

THE BOY AKUTO



p in the North, the remote Far North, by the bleak Arctic Ocean lived a boy called Akuto.

He tended deer, a large herd of a thousand or more. But the herd did not belong to the boy, his father or his grandfather. It belonged to the old shaman priest-doctor. Akuto and three other poor lads tended his deer. Akuto was afraid of the shaman. The others were too. He was the most important of the rich men.

Akuto had heard that somewhere beyond the tundra, beyond the forest-covered mountains, in the land called Russia, the people had got rid of their shamans. Power belonged to the ordinary people now, not to the shamans or rich men.

"If only that would happen in the tundra, too," thought the boy. "I wouldn't tend the shaman's herd. And the herd wouldn't belong to the shaman. The deer would be divided up between poor people—like my father and grandfather."

Akuto dreamed of that. Meanwhile Soviet power had already come to the tundra.

The boy left the herd for the day and went to his parents' tent. He saw his relatives and neighbours. They were all talking about the same thing: the deer would be taken away from the shaman, they would soon be divided up.

Then the old shaman came to the herd. His two younger brothers were with him. The shaman looked at Akuto angrily and ordered him to get the herd moving.

But they drove the herd away from the tents, not to them. Akuto realised the rich men had decided to take the deer away so that they would not be divided up. The large herd would disappear.

They travelled on all day further and further away. At night the shaman let them rest. Winter nights are long in the north. The rich men slept on the sledges in warm sacks. Akuto could not get to sleep. He was ready to cry.

But then a smile spread over the boy's face and he stuck his nose defiantly into the air.

In the morning the shaman and his two brothers awoke.

"What's happened?" the shaman asked in surprise. "Where is the herd? Where are the deer? And where is Akuto?"

The shaman looked round with wolfish glance. He could not believe his old eyes.

Then he realised that the boy was driving the herd back to the tents.

The two brothers jumped up. The shaman jumped up too. They set off in pursuit, shouting loudly.

Akuto raced like the wind.

The rich men raced like the wind.

Akuto raced like the wind.

The rich men raced like the wind.

Nearer and nearer, nearer and nearer they came. The shaman had almost reached Akuto. Akuto could not escape punishment now. Whom did you dare to defy, Akuto!

"Come on, deer," shouted Akuto. "Faster, deer, faster."

Akuto raced like the wind.

The rich men raced like the wind.

Akuto raced like the wind.

The rich men raced like the wind.

No, Akuto could not escape the shaman. He would not see his native tent again. Would not save the deer for the people.

Now the shaman was breathing down his neck.

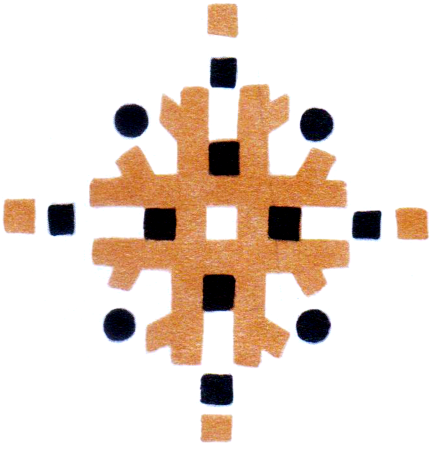
But what was that cloud over the tundra? What had whipped up the snow over the tundra? Akuto peered ahead. "Am I dreaming?" he wondered. People were racing towards him from the direction of his native tents. On deer or deer-drawn sledges. Rescue was at hand.

Akuto saw his father, his grandfather and the other people. The shaman saw the people too. He stopped his pursuit, turned tail and made off as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

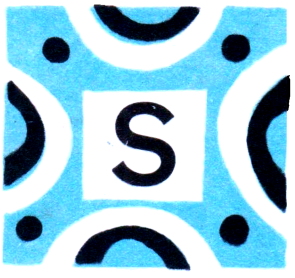
The sun rose over the tundra. The snow sparkled in its rays. The people returned to their tents. The herd raced over the tundra.

"Come on, deer!" Akuto shouted. "Faster, deer, faster!"

Akuto rode along on a deer. Be happy, Akuto, brave little boy!



MASTER OF THE BIG ARYK



oviet power came to Bukhara. Bukhara is far away, thousands of miles from Central Russia, in Central Asia under the blazing hot sun.

Rain is rare here, and the soil does not get enough water. Water is more precious than life here. To water the soil they dig canals in the steppes. The canals are called *aryks.* The rich landowners had all the water, because the rich landowners had all the aryks.

Suddenly the ordinary people could get water. It flew to the peasants' fields irrigating the parched soil.

The rich landowner Sultan Alimkulov, who owned a big aryk, had his aryk taken from him. Alimkulov cursed Soviet power. His water—for the peasants' lands! How was he to get the water back from the peasants? Should he drink it from the aryk? The greedy landowner would have drunk it all up, but that was impossible. He thought of another way...

One evening a boy called Sabir Rakhmetov crept into the landowner's apricot grove. The apricots were as big as your fist, a size that only grows in these parts. Suddenly Sabir heard footsteps. He flattened himself to the ground. The owner was approaching. Sultan Alimkulov. He was whispering to someone. Sabir managed to make out what they were saying—it was about the aryk, about the dam, about not giving the water to the peasants.

You horrid landowner! Sabir realised what it was meant. The rich man had decided to destroy the dam. Sabir forgot about the apricots and ran home as fast as he could.

Sabir's father, Rakhmat, was a poor peasant. And his father's father, Sabir's grandfather, old Kuddus, was a peasant, too. And Sabir's elder brother, Hafur, also worked on the land. When little Sabir grew up he would till the Bukhara soil as well. Sabir realised the danger: if the water was let out of the aryk, the peasants' fields would be dry.

The boy alerted his grandfather, father and brother. They alerted the neighbours. The peasants gathered and ran to the dam. They sat there all night. But Alimkulov did not appear.

"The boy made it up," the peasants decided.

"I heard him, I heard him," Sabir insisted. But they did not believe him.

Only Grandfather Kuddus believed him. Evening came again. Grandfather and grandson again went to the dam. The two of them sat there until morning. Their eyes, keener than owls', peered into the distance. Their ears caught every sound. But Alimkulov did not come.

Kuddus shook his head. Sabir must have been wrong.

"I heard him, I heard him," insisted Sabir. He looked at his grandfather. His grandfather obviously did not believe him.

Sabir told the boys about the landowner. Their eyes lit up. Each of them thought himself a hero. Each of them thought they would catch the landowner. They could hardly wait for evening. The boys lay in wait by the dam, motionless. They waited and waited. Their stomachs and sides got cramp. The cursed landowner did no appear.

Three nights running the boys went to the dam. Three days they returned empty-handed. They grew angry.

"Sabir made it up!"

Sabir's friends almost beat him. No one believed him. Only Halida. A girl is not much help. Still, what could Sabir do, if Halida was the only one in the whole village who believed him.

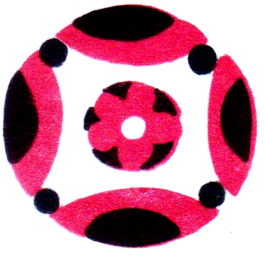
Evening came once more. Together they went to the dam. The two of them sat until morning. Their eyes, keener than owls', peered into the distance. Their ears caught every sound. Alimkulov did not come.

Now Sabir, too, began to have doubts. And to tell the truth, if the girl had not been there, goodness knows how it would all have ended.

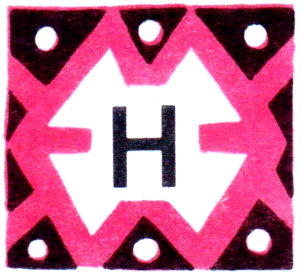
Well, they caught the villain. Or rather, chased him away. As soon as the landowner appeared, they shouted so loudly, especially Halida, that the peasants who were sleeping a mile off leapt to their feet straightaway.

The peasants caught the landowner and chased him away.

The water is flowing in the aryk, irrigating the peasants' land. The boy Sabir Rakhmatov walks round the grove—master of the Bukhara land, master of the aryk.



MY FIRST BOOK



ave any of you ever been to Chukotka? It is the farthermost point on the map of the Soviet Union. Soviet land ends there and America begins.

Has anyone been to Chukotka? Well, the little Chukchi boy Rytkheu was born and bred there.

The Chukchi are a brave, kind people. Go there and see for yourself. Today the Chukchi are engineers and doctors. But what about before? It is hard to believe. No one could read or write. The Chukchi were not considered real people. The little boy Rytkheu had never seen a book in his life. And he might well have died without seeing one.

But then Soviet power came to Chukotka.

One day a cheerful young lad arrived there on business. He brought a book with him. Rytkheu looked at the book, and the others looked at it, but no one knew what it was. They opened the first page and opened the last page. It even had pictures, but what were they holding in their hands?

The owner of the book explained that it was a book and these were letters and these were lines. The letters made up words and the words made up sentences. You can learn a lot from reading books. Books teach you a great deal. But first you must learn the alphabet. When you know the alphabet you can not only read, but pick up a pencil or pen and write any words you like.

Rytkheu was amazed by this. He could not take his eyes off the visitor. The latter explained to the boy how to write "a" and "b". Then he told him about "r" and "y".

He gave him a pencil and paper:

"Now have a go at writing."

Rytkheu wrote "R", then "y"...

The man told him about "t", "k", "h", "e", and "u".

And the boy wrote all these letters too.

"Now have a go at reading it!"

Rytkheu began to read and discovered to his amazement that he was saying the word "Rytkheu".

The Chukchi boy laughed. So this was the word for his name.

When the young man was leaving he said there would soon be a school in Chukotka. Rytkheu did not quite believe this. But he waited, and after a while a school was opened.

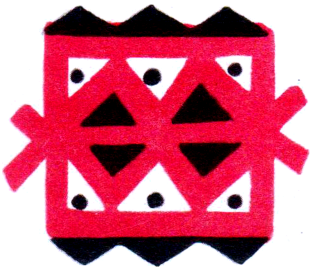
On the first day Rutkheu astounded everyone. He wrote "a" and "b" on the board.

"Well, I never," exclaimed the teacher. "How does the little Chukchi boy Rytkheu know about 'a' and 'b'?"

"I know about 'R' and 'y', too," the boy said proudly. He picked up the chalk again, and wrote "Ry" without any hesitation, then grinned and wrote out "Rytkheu" in full.

The teacher was surprised. Rytkheu had to tell them how he had learnt the alphabet.

Rytkheu was a good pupil at school. He liked reading and writing.

"When that boy grows up," thought the teacher, "he might write a book himself."

And so he did. Today Rytkheu is a well-known writer in the USSR. I have read his books.